

One Child at a Time: *Schools Build on Student Achievement*

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One of my greatest pleasures as a member of the Board of Education is attending celebrations at schools that have met the commonwealth's standards for academic achievement. I've attended celebrations at rural schools, suburban schools, and schools in the inner city. What these schools have in common are dedicated principals, creative teachers, and the understanding that school-wide success is achieved one child at a time.

School accreditation in Virginia is based on many criteria, but it also now includes how well students perform on Standards of Learning tests in the core subject areas of English, mathematics, history, and science. Generally speaking, a school achieves full accreditation when it meets all the state's criteria and at least 70 percent of the students pass SOL tests in each of the core areas of instruction.

While Virginia's accreditation standards speak of percentages of students, a school's ability to reach the goal of full accreditation rests on the accumulated success of individual students. For a school to succeed, individual students must achieve. It's that simple.

An Example in Norfolk

Because of this, the standards have brought about an increased focus on individualized instruction in Virginia's public schools. An excellent example of this phenomenon is Roberts Park Elementary School in Norfolk.

Roberts Park is surrounded by housing projects. Nearly all of its students qualify for free breakfast and lunch. Despite these factors, Roberts Park achieved full accreditation in 2001.

Roberts Park stands as a rebuttal to those who argue that socioeconomic status dictates achievement. The school also provides a lesson in how school accountability promotes individualized instruction.

The school has a true instructional leader in Principal Doreatha White. "I've always had high expectations for all students, no matter what their socioeconomic background," Ms. White recently told a guest at her school. "I know that all children, given the opportunity, can succeed." Spend a few hours at Roberts Park and it becomes clear that Dr. White believes every word of this statement.

The key to Ms. White's success has been the attention paid to the needs of individual students. She has made creative use of her staff and funding to reduce class sizes. Teachers use data from classroom tests and other assessments to form small groups of students with similar needs. Teachers at Roberts Park know if a student has failed to grasp a concept – and they do something about it. A child may fall behind at Roberts Park, but he or she is not left behind. At the same time, children who are ready to move on are able to do so; they're not held back until every one of their classmates "gets it."

Narrowing Achievement Gap

Roberts Park achieved full accreditation by raising student achievement one student at a time. Its success and the success of other inner city Norfolk schools have resulted in a significant narrowing of the achievement gap between black and white students. This is good news and should be cheered by all Virginians who care about our public schools.

Schools across Virginia are making similar use of data to the benefit of individual students. Classroom teachers are discovering that the tests they develop can be powerful tools for assessing the needs of students and making decisions about instruction. Teachers are gaining the professional satisfaction that comes from making decisions that benefit children and seeing the results.

Yes, Virginia has academic standards all students are expected to meet. But these standards have not resulted in a "one-size-fits-all" statewide curriculum. While the Board of Education has prescribed standards, it is still the job of local school divisions to develop the complete curricula.

What the state has provided are curriculum frameworks to help teachers prepare lessons that cover the standards. Many school divisions are developing their own guides. Equipped with these tools, teachers begin the school year with a clear map of the material they must cover for their students to meet the learning objectives of the standards. But it is up to the teacher to develop the lessons and teaching strategies that best fit the needs of students.

Building on the Framework

For example, a first-grade teacher at Randolph Elementary School in Goochland County, where I am principal, used the framework for science as a springboard to develop a lesson on motion. The lesson involved the use of a ramp and Matchbox cars. The kids loved it and they learned. The teacher said he would not have made the connection between the learning standard on motion and the use of toy cars had it not been for the framework.

The notion that Virginia students are being subjected to a "one-size-fits-all" education also is belied by the rise in the number of high school students enrolled in Advanced Placement and other college level courses. Virginia has received national recognition for the growth of these programs.

Seventy percent of Virginia's 1,839 K-12 public schools now either meet or are well on their way to meeting the 2007 standard for academic accreditation. In celebrating the success of these schools we also celebrate the increasing efforts of teachers and other educators to make sure that no child is left behind.

Next month, we'll talk about how parents can help their children succeed on the spring 2002 SOL tests and the many options available to high school students for earning a diploma.

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